

FISCHER-HANLON HOUSE
135 G Street
Benicia
Solano County
California

HALS CA-27
CA-27

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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FISCHER-HANLON HOUSE

HALS NO. CA-27

Location: 135 G Street, Benicia, Solano County, CA
Lat: 38.05095 Long: -122.16000

Significance: The Fischer Hanlon landscape is a Historic Vernacular Landscape, as defined by the National Park Service: "It is a landscape whose physical, biological, and cultural features reflect the customs and everyday lives of people" (Page R., 1998). The period of significance is from 1890 to 1968, which spans three generations of the Fischer family. The landscape appears to meet Criterion C for its significance as an excellent example of the evolution of a small town residential landscape over the course of 100 years, covering the time of early settlement and the use of parts of the land for primarily practical purposes to the conversion of the land to primarily aesthetic and recreational purposes, while retaining important markers from each era.

The property was placed on the National Register in 1979 at a time when that landscape was generally not taken into consideration. This landscape is significant for its historic character and historic elements, and for the fact that it clearly tells a story about the evolution of residential landscapes in California from 1859-1968. In general, later additions to the garden have not obscured or obliterated the long-standing features and components that were laid out in the late nineteenth century and today provide a backdrop to the early twentieth century garden. It is unusual in that evidence of many of the historic uses of the land are still present. The landscape retains integrity in that the spatial relationships are intact, most of the buildings remain, and most paving materials are original. Some plants on the site are well over 50 years old, a handful may be close to or more than 100 years old.

History: The Fischer-Hanlon lot is one of the original town lots and was purchased by Joseph Fischer in 1858. Family legend held that the existing building had been a partially burned hotel that was moved to the site and remodeled. The following is excerpted from the State of California Resources Agency, Primary Record:

"The Fischer-Hanlon House is one of the oldest and well documented residential structures in Benicia. It is associated with the founding and early development of the town and with an individual, Joseph Fischer, important in the town's economic and civic life... The building remained within the Fischer-Hanlon family for 100 years until it was donated to the State of California by Joseph Fischer's granddaughters. It has been recognized as California State Landmark no. 880, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and contributes to the Benicia Downtown Historic District (Associates, 1994)."

Joseph and Catherine Fischer raised three children in the house; Elizabeth, Martha and Joseph. The gardens appear to have been repositories for interesting plants from early days, a tradition expanded by the Hanlon sisters, the third and final owners of the property. In its early days, the back yard was used for practical purposes and had a dirt surface with planks used to provide dry passage to various locations in the yard. Sanborn fire insurance maps show that cows were housed in the back yard in the late 1800s. By 1891 a small barn was added, and it seems that chickens were kept. Oral histories state that the back area was used for hanging out laundry. Martha Fischer Quinn, second owner of the property, initiated the most significant changes to the property. (Quinn was born in the house, married around 1902, and lived in the house until 1938.) She established the large brick patio in the back yard. She retained the barn and kept one horse (and probably planted the wisteria, likely the oldest plant on the property, near the horse enclosure). She also kept chickens, according to oral history of the Hanlons, but by the 1940s several long, narrow structures, which may have been for chickens, had been removed. Quinn retained the privy, although a bathroom was added to the house, and converted the space from one that was primarily practical in function to a space that was used, for greater extent, for leisure. This shift marks a profound change, occurring nationally, in the purpose and use of outdoor residential space in pioneer towns in the early 1900s, brought on by industrialization, the growth and establishment of viable towns, the availability of purchasable goods, and the availability of time-saving devices for housekeeping.

When the Hanlon sisters, Catherine, Marie and Raphaelita, inherited the house from their aunt in 1938, they were living in San Francisco. They retained the house and garden plan essentially as they had received them and used the property as a weekend and summer home, making the transition complete from a landscape used for work to a landscape used for leisure. They added several plants to the landscape, establishing a cactus and succulent garden on the west side of the property, and they retained the layout, circulation, and structures already present.

The Hanlon sisters deeded the property to California State Parks in 1969. The house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The house was photographed for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1977. State Parks did remove a lot of plant material and did add several plants to the landscape in the 1970s. (Dimensions given are approximate) Fern Dale (Shaw House) is on Main Street at Lewis in the town of Ferndale. There is a white picket fence at the sidewalk the full width of the property. The fence consists of 6" wide horizontal boards at the base up to 18" high. These boards are routed in a way to make them look like stone blocks. At the top the horizontal portion of the fence are 2x2 wood pickets with four sided angled points. Every other picket is 3" shorter than the higher pickets. The entire fence is painted white. This fence appears in a drawing of the property dated 1900.

There is an opening at the center of the street frontage where the fence angles back at a 45 degree angle. Hardware suggests there use to be a gate. Either side of the opening is a 12" square timber post. The right post is topped with an elaborate rounded finale (the 1900 drawing depicts a square cap on a higher post). The left post is lacking a finial. At either side of the opening the concrete sidewalk is stamped 1902. There are similar posts on the NW side of the lot where the original driveway was. (current drive entry is at the NE side of the property and leads to a compatibly designed 3 car garage) The original drive apron is specially scored and appears to be original as it can be seen in the 1900 image.

From the entry opening a 4 foot wide concrete path leads directly towards the main gable of the front of the house. 15 feet before the house the path Y's with one half leading to the front porch and the other to the garages and another porch entry. A triangular planting bed is formed by the Y. This alignment of walk and planting bed is clearly visible in a 1900 drawing from "The History of Humboldt County Illustrated" The condition of the entry walk shows significant deterioration for a 30' section suggesting at least that portion is original and it may be original in its entirety.

The fencing on the NW and NE property lines is distinctly different from the fence at the sidewalk. It consists of 1x4 boards trimmed to create a rhythm of ups and downs. It is painted white. Further research is needed to determine if this fence matches an original.

The front garden is planted in lawn and within the lawn many round and curvilinear planting beds are cut out. Most of these beds include a specimen tree with understory ferns, perennials and shrubs. There is also a linear planting bed inside and paralleling the front fence along the sidewalk. Plantings here include: anemone, lavender, dicentra, dahlia, amaryllis, sword fern, camellia, buddleia, rose, and lilac – all species appropriate to a garden of the period. The grades in the front lawn are not flat – the lawn undulates rising gently from the sidewalk to the house and from the NE side of the property to the NW.

To the left of the front gate opening is an exceptional buckeye tree (*Aesculus californica*) with a gnarly trunk approximately 4 feet in diameter. The tree is low branching with a well balanced canopy that extends over the sidewalk and to the middle of the closest lane of traffic. Other trees on the property that appear to be original are: redwood, walnut, big leaf maple, birch, hawthorn, Monterey cypress, holly, and one apple.

The garden has several mature, old fashioned shrubs some of which may be original. These include: old roses, a viburnum, and a large rambling fuchsia. There are also several trees, shrubs and perennials that are recent additions.

Other features that appear to be recent additions include a brick patio on the NW side of the house, a gazebo, a pea gravel path lined with brick, a horseshoe pit, and a stone pond and fountain. The later may have replaced a historic pond. 2 wood swings might also be replacements for similar historic swings, or not.

The property was designated as a state historic landmark on February 13, 1982, and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 13, 1984.

Description: The 0.43 acre site is located in the town of Benicia in a historic residential neighborhood, adjoining a historic commercial street. The house and gardens are part of the Benicia Capitol State Historic Park; the old Benicia State Capitol building is next door. Along the street edge is located a low stone wall (built by State Parks), behind which is located a reconstructed picket fence. An old carved stone carriage block with the name "Fischer" inscribed on it is in front of the house near the curb. Purple-blooming locust trees (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) line parts of the back edge of the fence, and other locust tree stumps are visible in the same straight line, nearer to the front path to the house. Concrete steps leads up through the gate to the short concrete front path. Brick paths to the side and back yards gently arc through the front yard. The back garden has a large and irregularly shaped brick patio that is edged with various sizes and types of stone. The bricks are various in color, many were laid as broken pieces, and several contain imprints from their makers or original locations, such as "Carnegie" and "Snowball."

A wood single-story structure (that once housed a servant), a wood privy, and a wood barn are backed up against the rear wood fence, which is located on the rear alley. Several trees are located throughout the landscape, but are about half the number recorded in the 1970s. Among the extant trees are locust, olive, pepper tree (*Schinus molle*) cow itch (*Lagunaria pattersonii*), strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*), several citrus, and fig. Shrubs, succulents, cactus and perennials crowd the planting areas beneath the trees and include roses, jade plant (*Crassula argentea*), *Fuchsia arborescens* (transplanted and/or slip-grown from an old planting), several aloe and agave, abelia, cast iron plant (*Aspidistra*), *Clematis armandii*, Aucuba, and spiraea. California State Parks and/or volunteers have added many plants since the late 1970s and are probably responsible for the *Buddleia*, *Lavatera*, *Echium*, pomegranate, *Ceanothus*, and lilacs. Several orchid cactus appear in wood planter boxes; according to the Hanlon sisters it is a plant that Joseph Fischer grew and these are said to be direct descendents of his plants.

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The house as it appeared in 2007. The locust trees that once lined the front of the house now appear outside the image on the edges of the property. The old carriage block is visible in front of the house, as are the reconstructed picket fence and the California State Parks era stone wall (Janet Gracyk, April 2, 2007).



The extensive patio in the back yard, outlined with various bricks and stones. The barn is visible, and the brick "Old Capitol" is visible in the distance. The fig in the center of the photograph is an offshoot of the very old fig on site (Janet Gracyk, April 2, 2007).